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ABSTRACT

A follow-up study was undertaken at Lansing Community College (Michigan) to determine whether former students had achieved their educational objectives, to collect assessment data on instruction and support services, and to identify the impact of college attendance on employment status. A stratified sample of 3,000 non-returning students was mailed a questionnaire. The data were analyzed by educational objective and completion of that objective. Of those who responded, 41% indicated an employment-related objective, 24% a transfer objective, and 12% indicated personal interest as an objective. A majority indicated their objective had been accomplished. Of those with employment objectives, 67% indicated that they were currently employed in an area related to their training. Former students reflected a positive assessment of the college's support systems, instruction, and academic courses. Of the support services, the planetarium programs, classroom and laboratory equipment, and the library facilities received the highest ranking. The general academic courses affected these students most in the areas of improved communication skills, increased feelings of self worth, and an increase in understanding others. A discussion of the mechanics of administering the survey and analyzing the results is also included. (Author/MB)

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COLLEGE WIDE FORMER STUDENT FOLLOW UP STUDY

by

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College Wide Former Student Follow Up Survey

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The College Wide follow up was undertaken to determine whether former students had achieved their educational objectives, to collect assessment data on instruction and support services and to identify the impact of the college on employment status. A stratified sample of 3,000 non-returning students was mailed a questionnaire. The data was analyzed by educational objective and completion of that objective. Of those who responded 41% indicated an employment related objective, 24% a transfer objective and 12% indicated personal interest as an objective. A majority indicated their objective had been accomplished. Of those students with employment objectives, 67% indicated that they were currently employed in an area related to their training.

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INTRODUCTION

Lansing Community College provides flexible and highly diversified educational offerings for its students. Curricula range from 2 year health career programs to much shorter 3 and 4 week programs designed to provide job skills for immediate employment. As a result of flexible and diversified curricula and college enrollment procedures which make courses and programs easily accessible, students are able to use the college to meet their educational needs. However, this flexibility makes it difficult to gather data on students who have left the college. Since programs are not rigid and lock step, students can leave without completing degrees or certificates. As a result of this flexibility, it is difficult to assess whether or not a student has completed his program or reached his educational objective at the college.

In the Summer of 1977 the Institutional Research Office at Lansing Community College carried out a college wide follow up study of former Lansing Community College students. This college wide former student follow up was undertaken to accomplish three specific objectives. First the college wanted to determine whether former students felt that they had achieved their educational objectives by attending Lansing Community College. A second objective of the former student follow up study was the collection of assessment data on the college's instructional processes, support services, and the benefits derived from the college's general academic courses as they were provided by the college from 1970 to 1974. A third objective was to gather data which could identify the impact of Lansing Community College on its former students, in terms of their present employment, job skills, and job advancement.

A review of the literature was completed to assist in the development of a conceptual framework and a sample strategy for the study. Williams and Snyder (1974) suggest inclusion of both graduates and non-graduates in the same, and also note the need to relate student responses to educational goals. In addition, Konrad (1973) recommends development of a follow up procedure which can be used for additional programmatic follow up in the future. Consequently, a college wide committee of divisional research officers was used to develop the questionnaire.

A sample of former students selected for the follow up was chosen from the population of students who had not returned to the college since their last enrollment in 1970, 1972 or 1974. The years 1970, 1972 and 1974 were chosen so that the follow up study could fill a gap which existed since the last college wide follow up study in 1969.

METHOD

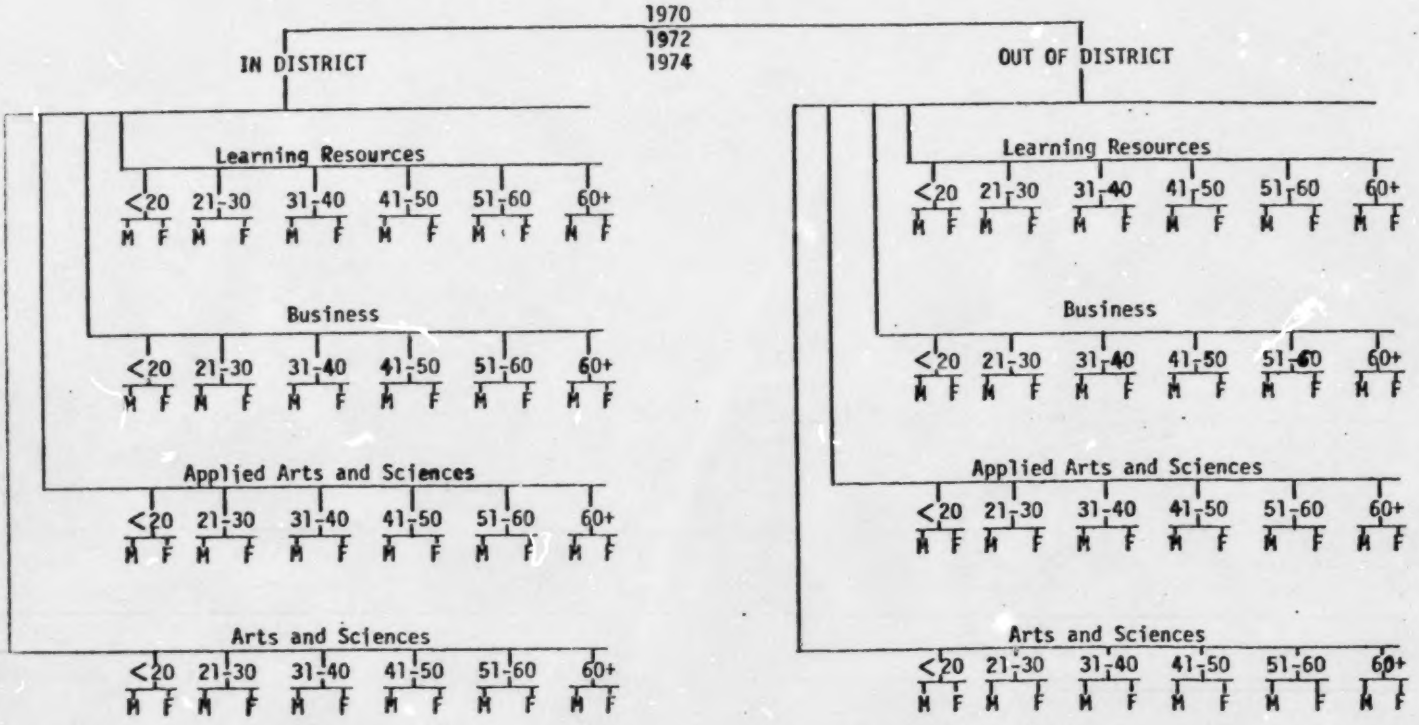
The follow up questionnaire was developed through a series of meetings with each division's research representative. The research representatives ranked, in order of importance, a list of concerns for possible questions.

From this ranking, a series of items addressing each of the content areas was identified. In addition the divisional representatives identified specific concerns which they felt should be addressed in order to meet their divisional information needs. The questionnaire items were developed as a result of this process.

The follow up study was directed to three thousand former students whose last term at the college was Summer, Winter, Spring or Fall of 1970, 1972 or 1974. One thousand students were selected from each year. The sample was stratified using the variables of residency, curriculum code, age and sex. (Figure 1)

FIGURE 1

SAMPLE STRATEGY



Once the sample population was divided into homogeneous subsets by using the stratification variables, relative proportions of the population were then selected to approximate the student body. To verify student addresses, all of the names and addresses drawn for the sample were checked and updated according to the 1976-77 Lansing Area Telephone Directory.

Each subject in the study was mailed a follow up packet which included: a cover letter, the follow up questionnaire, and a self addressed, stamped return envelope. After six weeks, those former students with verified addresses were remailed a second questionnaire packet with a different letter which requested their response if they had not already responded. Each of the return envelopes was coded to indicate year, residency, curriculum code and age so that the returned questionnaires could be analyzed for response biasses by using the original sample parameters.

The data from the returned questionnaires was coded and key punched by the Lansing Community College Management Information System. A standard item analysis and cross tabs routine were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS

The objectives of the college wide former student follow up study were to determine whether former students achieved their educational objectives, to assess the college's instructional processes, support services and the benefits derived from general academic courses and to gather data on former students' job expectations, job skills, and subsequent employment since leaving Lansing Community College. The returned questionnaires were analyzed to provide information which related to each of the study's objectives.

Former Students and Their Educational Objectives

The initial focus for this section of the data analysis grouped former student responses to the question which asked "which of the following best describes your most important reason (objective) for first attending Lansing Community College?". The alternative responses were: 1) to take some courses with an interest in transferring to another school, 2) to learn a skill, trade or begin work in a profession, 3) was strongly encouraged by friends, 4) to obtain training in a specific program, 5) to take courses of personal interest, 6) to obtain an associate degree and transfer to a four year college, 7) desired a certificate/degree to upgrade job skills, 8) to acquire new skills in order to retain your job, 9) to acquire new skills in order to qualify for another job, 10) was strongly encouraged by parents and 11) to obtain an associate degree. In addition, a category was provided for personalized responses.

Of the 408 students who returned questionnaires, 41% indicated an employment or job related objective as their reason for attending Lansing Community College, 34% indicated an associate degree and transfer as their objective, and 12% indicated that they attended in order to take courses of personal interest. The objective "to obtain an associate degree" was selected by only 3% of the respondents. Eight percent specified other more personalized objectives, while a few former students, 3% combined, indicated that friends and parents were the motivating factors in their attendance at Lansing Community College. Table I shows the distribution of students by educational objective. As might be expected from 1970 to 1974 the percent

of students who indicated transfer as their educational objective was reduced and the percent of students indicating courses of personal interest increased.

TABLE I

DISTRIBUTION OF FORMER STUDENTS BY EDUCATION OBJECTIVE

Educational Objectives	# Responding	% Responding
To obtain an associate degree and transfer to a four year college	69	17.0%
To take some courses with an interest in transferring	68	16.8%
To learn a skill, a trade, or begin work in a profession	58	14.4%
To obtain training in a specific program	53	13.1%
To take courses of personal interest	49	12.1%
To acquire new skills in order to qualify for another job	31	7.7%
Other	31	7.7%
Desired a certificate/degree to upgrade job skills	13	3.2%
To obtain an associate degree	13	3.2%
To acquire new skills in order to retain your job	10	2.5%
Was strongly encouraged by friends	6	1.5%
Was strongly encouraged by parents	3	.8%
TOTAL	404	100.0%

A majority of former students, 66%, indicated that their educational objective had been accomplished by the time they left the college. Of those individuals who indicated that their educational objective had not been accomplished, the reasons most often selected for non-completion were "personal reasons" and "an opportunity for full time employment". Of this group of non-completers, 26% described their own reasons for not completing their educational objectives. The most common of these reasons were a lack of time, increased understanding of a limited job market, and a reevaluation of personal goals.

There did not appear to be a relationship between a former student's educational objectives and completion or non-completion of those objectives. For example, those former students with employment related objectives did not have a higher completion rate than was indicated by those students with transfer as their objective, although the completion rates of students whose educational objective was to obtain an associate degree was much lower than completion rates for students with other objectives. The completion rates for each objective are shown in Table II.

TABLE II

COMPLETION OF EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVE
AS REPORTED BY FORMER STUDENTS

Educational Objectives	Objective Completed	Objective Not Completed	Percent Completed
To obtain an associate degree and transfer to a four year college	46	22	66.6%
To take some courses with an interest in transferring	53	14	77.9%
To learn a skill, a trade, or begin work in a profession	36	19	62.0%
To obtain training in a specific program	38	16	71.6%
To take courses of personal interest	35	13	71.4%
To acquire new skills in order to qualify for another job	18	13	58.0%
Other	19	11	61.2%
Desired a certificate/degree to upgrade job skills	9	4	69.2%
To obtain an associates degree	5	7	38.4%
To acquire new skills in order to retain your job	7	2	70.0%

In general, former students listed cost and location most often as the two most important reasons for selecting Lansing Community College as their educational institution. As might be expected, students whose educational objectives were to maintain or upgrade jobs most often cited evening course offerings as their major reason for attending Lansing Community College. For students whose educational objective was to obtain training in a specific program, programs offered was listed as the reason for attending this institution. The college's programs were also considered to be an important factor for those students whose objective was to take courses of personal interest.

Instructional Processes, Support Services, and the Benefits of General Academic Courses

The response of former students regarding the instructional processes, the services provided by the college and the benefits derived from general academic courses were initially examined to assess former student attitudes towards the college. In addition the responses to the three groups of questions were analyzed by year, by division and by educational objective.

A. All Former Students

Former student perceptions concerning the impact of general academic courses were gathered by asking for agreement or disagreement with a series of items which stated the possible benefits of general academic courses. For these items a score of 5 would indicate strong agreement with the statement regarding the impact of these courses. A score of 1 would indicate strong disagreement that there had been any impact.

The three statements with which students agreed most strongly and, therefore, indicated were most beneficial were "communication skills have improved" (3.9), "feelings of self worth have increased" (3.8), and "understanding of others has improved" (3.7). The three general academic impacts which former students agreed with least and therefore felt were not of particular benefit were "civic and political participation has increased" (3.0), "participation in community activities increased" (3.1), and "participation in cultural activities increased" (3.2).

The instructional process at Lansing Community College was examined by asking former students to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with nine statements about instruction at Lansing Community College. In this section, for example, a response indicating disagreement with the statement "the instructors appeared to be well qualified" could be regarded as a negative evaluation of one element of the instructional process. A score of 5 would be indicative of a very favorable evaluation of the instructional process. None of the means for the statements which related to instruction fell below the midpoint of 2.5 for this category.

The three items of highest agreement were "the instructors appeared to be well qualified" (4.2), "Course offerings were adequate for the student's program" (4.1), and "overall, the students were favorably impressed with the instruction" (4.1). The three items which received the least amount of agreement were that the "grading system did not reflect the student's knowledge" (3.2), "that interest in academic subjects increased" (3.6), and "that the classroom atmosphere made students feel at ease" (3.7).

Former students were asked to rate 15 services provided by the college during the time they were enrolled. For these items the scale ranged from 7 to 1, from excellent to poor. Included for rating were such things as food services, counseling, recreational facilities, social activities, campus security, classroom equipment and AV materials and parking.

The three services which received the highest ratings from former students in order of the ratings were the planetarium programs (5.6), the classroom and laboratory equipment (5.3) and the library facilities (5.1). The three services which received the lowest ratings were parking (2.8), the counselor's assistance in program planning (4.1) and the college's recreational activities (4.1).

The most frequently indicated benefits derived from academic courses, the most notable aspects of the instructional process and the most highly rated services are listed in rank order as follows:

Frequently Indicated Benefits Derived From Academic Courses

-- improved communication skills
-- increased feelings of self worth
-- increased understanding of others

Notable Aspects of the Instructional Process

-- instructors' qualifications
-- adequacy of course offerings in relationship to students' program
-- overall favorably impressed with instruction

Highly Rated Services

-- planetarium programs
-- classroom and laboratory equipment
-- library facilities

B. Former Students Educational Objectives and Instructional Processes, the College's Support Services and the Benefits of General Academic Courses

To identify whether a student's educational objective affected their response, the data for each of the three groups of questions was analyzed according to educational objective. Individual items were not examined. Significant differences were found to occur depending upon educational objective in each of the three areas. In the area of instructional processes, students whose educational objective was to obtain a certificate/degree to upgrade job skills indicated significantly more disagreement with the instructional statements than students did with any other educational objective. That is, these students seemed to evaluate the instructional process more harshly than did students' with other educational objectives. When the impacts of general academic courses were examined, students with the objective of obtaining training in a specific program and the objective of acquiring new skills in order to qualify for another job responded more positively to the impact of these courses than students with any other objectives. The services offered by the college were rated significantly higher by students with the objectives of obtaining training in a specific program and by students with personal interest as their objective.

Former student attitudes regarding the benefits derived from the college's general academic courses, the services provided and the instructional process did not vary greatly depending upon whether the student felt he had completed his educational objective. The attitudes of the completers and non-completers were compared on each question for each educational objective. Differences between completers and non-completers occurred in only two cases. For the group of former students who specified transfer as an objective, completers indicated a greater degree of community involvement and higher ratings for counseling and faculty advising than did the non-completers. A second significant difference occurred regarding parking. Although parking was not particularly well thought of by any group, it was perceived more favorably by the completers whose objectives were to obtain training in a specific field, to take courses of personal interest or to transfer. Other differences were not observed.

C. Responses by Year and by Division Enrolled

When the responses were examined by year, significant differences in attitudes toward the instructional processes, the services provided and the benefits derived from general academic courses were not found to exist among 1970, 1972 and 1974 former students. In the analysis which grouped students by divisions, according to the curriculum codes for each of the sample years, student attitudes regarding the instructional process, the services provided and the benefits derived from general academic courses differed in only one group. The one exception occurred in the data from the 1970 former students with curriculum codes in the Business Division. These students evaluated the college's services more favorably than did students who had been enrolled in Arts and Sciences and Applied Arts and Sciences.

Present Employment, Job Skills, and Job Advancement

As a comprehensive community college, Lansing Community College serves a variety of constituencies. One of the constituencies is made up of those students who attend Lansing Community College for a job related reason. To identify these former students, the study provided former students the opportunity to identify one of 5 distinct job related reasons for their attendance at Lansing Community College. The job related reasons for attending were: "to learn a skill, a trade, or begin work in a profession", "to obtain training in a specific program", "desired a certificate/degree to upgrade job skills", "to acquire new skills in order to retain your job", and "to acquire new skills in order to qualify for another job". Additional questions were included which assessed the former students' employment status, their job expectations, their Lansing Community College preparation for employment and their present employment. The responses of the students with job related reasons for attending were combined for the data analysis.

When asked how their present employment compares with the job they expected after attending Lansing Community College, 23% of the students with job related objectives indicated that their present job is better than they expected. Another 48% felt their job is about the same as they expected after attending Lansing Community College. Thirteen percent felt their job was less than they expected, while 16% were unable to say whether it was better, the same or worse than they expected. (Table III)

TABLE III

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT
AS COMPARED TO JOB EXPECTATIONS

Employment Related Educational Objectives	Better Than Expected	Same As Expected	Less Than Expected
To learn a skill, a trade, or begin work in a profession	24%	40%	10%
To obtain training in a specific program	13%	35%	7%
Desired a certificate/degree to upgrade job skills	8%	38%	8%
To acquire new skills in order to qualify for another job	19%	39%	13%
To acquire new skills in order to retain your job	20%	20%	10%

Of the students with job related objectives, 67% are presently employed in an area related to their course of study at Lansing Community College. In contrast, less than one-half of the students who indicated personal interest as their reason for attending are employed in an area related to their course of study at Lansing Community College. For those students whose objective was transfer to another institution, 54% are now employed in an area related to their course of study.

It appears that the former students with jobs as an objective for attending Lansing Community College have positive feelings about how well their Lansing Community College experience prepared them for subsequent employment. Only 9% of the students with job related reasons for attending indicated that Lansing Community College had prepared them "not very well" or "poorly" for subsequent employment. Eighty-one percent responded that their course of study prepared them "satisfactorily", "reasonably well", and "very well" for subsequent employment.

The questionnaire also included a question on present income. Former students were asked to indicate an income bracket which most closely corresponded to their 1976 income. Based upon the students' self report, 3% of those who had job related reasons for attending Lansing Community College are now employed. Fifty percent made $12,000 or more in 1976, while 47% made less than $12,000. Examination of income for students with job related objectives shows that 13% made over $21,000, 8% made between $18-21,000, 15% made between $15-$18,000, and 14% made between $12-$15,000. For those under $12,000 per year, 10% made less than $6,000, 23% made between $6-$9,000, and 14% made between $9-$12,000 in 1976. In comparison the median income bracket by self report for students whose educational objectives were not job related was $12,000-$15,000, while 14% made less than $6,000, 13% made between $6,000 and $9,000, 21% made between $9,000 and $12,000, 15% made between $12,000 and $15,000, 11% made between $15,000 and $18,000, 15% made between $18,000 and $21,000 and 8% made over $21,000.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Implications

The college wide former student follow up study had three primary objectives. These were: 1) to determine whether or not former Lansing Community College students felt that they had achieved their educational objectives by attending the institution; 2) to collect assessment data on the college's instructional processes, support services, and the benefits derived from the college's general academic courses; 3) to identify the impact of Lansing Community College on its former students, in terms of their present employment, job skills and job advancement

In general, the data from the former student follow up study indicates that a majority of our former students felt that their educational objective had been accomplished by the time they left the college. These data are particularly important when one considers that the students addressed in this study are those who have not re-enrolled at the college since 1970, 1972 or 1974. It may be that these students have not returned because their educational objective has been achieved. The reasons most often selected for the non-completion of educational objectives were reasons external to the college.

Former student attitudes reflect a positive assessment of the college's support systems, instruction and the academic courses. Of the support services, the planetarium programs, classroom and laboratory equipment and the library facilities received the highest rating. Parking received the lowest rating. The low rating received by parking came from students whose last term of enrollment was either 1970, 1972 or 1974, prior to the completion of the college's parking facility. Although parking did receive a low rating, the remainder of the services provided by the college did not receive any ratings that were below "average".

Overall, former student impressions in the area of general academic courses and the instructional process appear to be very favorable. Students were impressed with the instructional process, and indicated that course offerings were adequate for their programs. They also indicated that the instructors appeared to be well qualified. The general academic courses impacted them the most in the area of improved communication skills, increased feelings of self worth, and an increase in understanding others. Although students were impressed with the instructional process and the instructors' qualifications, they felt that the grading system did not adequately reflect their knowledge. Aside from the relatively low rating given to the grading system, former students responded very positively to both the college's instructional process and the benefits derived from general academic courses.

The results obtained from former students whose objective in attending the college was employment related indicate that these students have highly positive feelings about how well their Lansing Community College experiences prepared them for employment. A majority of these students are presently employed in an area related to their course of study at the college and feel that their present job is the same or better than they expected as a result of attending the college. In this area, as well as in the college's services and the instructional processes, former students' responses were favorable.

It should be noted that a former student's educational objective was the most pertinent variable in relation to a former student's perceptions of the college. Other variables such as the student's division or the last year enrolled at the college were not as important. As a result, the identification of a student's educational objective may provide more commonly identified demographic variables.

Response Bias

One of the major disadvantages of a mailed questionnaire is the difficulty involved in insuring a high percentage return rate. A second problem of particular consideration in this study was the currency of student addresses. Lansing Community College maintains the address used the last term the student was enrolled. Consequently the address list was very much out of date. In light of these difficulties and an anticipated low rate of return, the returned questionnaires were examined to assess what types of bias might be involved.

This analysis was divided into two parts: 1) to assess the effect the out-dated addresses might have had and 2) to characterize the respondents and non-respondents on the basis of the sample variables. In both cases the analysis[1] was designed to assess the extent to which the respondents or non-respondents were randomly distributed over the sample variables, therefore representing the population. (Donald, 1960) The literature suggests that non-response is related to the respondent's motivational state and his/her involvement with the organization. Therefore, it was assumed that former students who held positive as well as negative attitudes were more apt to be motivated to return questionnaires. In addition, it was also assumed that the attitudes of the non-respondents would not be strongly held. Since a major interest was the attitudes of former students, the analysis made no attempt to compare the attitudes of early and late respondents in order to estimate the attitudes of non-respondents.

For the purpose of these analyses, the questionnaires were divided into four categories: 1) questionnaires that were initially sent or mailed out, 2) questionnaires that were returned to the Institutional Research Office by the post office as non-deliverable, 3) questionnaires that were assumed to have been delivered because they were not returned by the post office and 4) questionnaires that were returned to the Institutional Research Office filled out by former students. When mailed, each questionnaire was coded to indicate the year, division, age and sex of the intended respondent.

[1] In each case the proportion or percent under examination was compared to the proportion sent using the Chi-Squared (X^2) as a measure of the difference between observed and theoretical frequencies. The theoretical was operationally defined as the proportion sent.

Addresses

To estimate the effect the out-dated addresses might have had on the study, the number of questionnaires returned to the Research Office was examined on the basis of the sample variables. Using the sample age groups: less than 20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60 and over 60, the proportion of non-delivered questionnaires in each age category was examined for the entire sample, by year, by division within year and by sex within age category within division by year. Former students sampled between the ages of 21 and 30 had the highest proportion of questionnaires not delivered, approximately 60% for the entire sample and ranging from 57% to 67% from 1970 to 1974. The age group less than 20 was also high (20%) in comparison to the other age categories. Differences in non-delivered questionnaires by division were not observed within age category. The current age of these groups of students (less than 20 and 21-30) would now range between 20 and 37. It is known that this age group is commonly characterized as extremely mobile. Therefore, in an effort to understand the effect the outdated addresses might have had, the proportion of delivered questionnaires were compared to the proportion of questionnaires mailed out for the sample variables; year, division, age and sex. The data suggest that the address problem within the 21-30 year old age group could primarily be attributed to females. The proportion of questionnaires assumed to be delivered in this age group to females were substantially less than the proportions mailed out. In general, this result was found regardless of division for 1972 and 1974.

Returned Questionnaires

Since the sample was selected to be proportionately representative of the student body on the basis of the stratification variables of year, division, age and sex, the returned questionnaires were examined to assess the degree to which the sample proportions were maintained. For example, 49% of the questionnaires sent were initially mailed to students whose curriculum codes indicated that they had been enrolled in the Arts and Sciences division, 16.6% in the Applied Arts and Sciences division and 34.4% in the Business division. Of the returned questionnaires 54.3% came from former Arts and Sciences students, 14.5% came from Applied Arts and Sciences students and 31.4% came from Business students. The proportion returned for each division was not found to be significantly different from the proportion sent.

Similar comparisons were made for each of the other sample variables. Of those former students who returned questionnaires, differences were not observed between the proportion sent by year, by division, by age or by sex. In other words, even though the return rate was low, the returned questionnaires did not weight the responses of one year over another, one division over another or one sex over the other, or one age group over another.

Respondents and Non-Respondents

The non-returned questionnaires, operationally defined as the number delivered minus the number returned, were examined by sex, by year, and by age group to characterize the non-respondents on the basis of the sample variables. The greatest proportion of non-respondent occurred in the first two age categories, less than 20 and 21-30. In addition, the proportion of males in these age categories who did not respond was greater than the proportion of females not responding in these age categories. This is particularly interesting in light of the observed problem delivering questionnaires to females within these age categories. The fact that the sample proportions were maintained suggest that females probably returned more questionnaires than males.

Rating Data

It is important to note that the data reported as former student ratings of college services does not include any indication of the number of students who answered that question. The response option "no opinion" was often used in this section. For example, the planetarium programs received the highest rating but also had only 139 students responding with 202 no opinions.

The rationale for including the no opinion alternative was twofold. First, the services are rated by informed former students who were probably familiar with the support services. Second, the "no opinion" option is reported to minimize the over use of the midpoint or average scale rating.

Suggestions

The college wide follow up has provided data to assess former student attitudes toward the institution's instructional process, support services and the personal benefits derived from general academic courses. The results also provide data from which to evaluate the impact of the college on former students in terms of their present employment, job skills and job advancement.

The data gathered from the survey suggest that former Lansing Community College students view the college favorably. It suggests that a majority of the students who attended in 1970, 1972 and 1974 accomplished what they felt were their educational objectives before they left the college. In addition it appears that former students are employed in areas related to their training and that their training adequately prepared them for employment.

It would appear to be a worthwhile effort to continue to conduct follow up studies on an ongoing basis to gather longitudinal data for comparative purposes. Furthermore, it appears that identification of students' educational objectives, combined with issues of attrition, commitment to the objectives, placement and completion of the objective may provide valuable data for assessment and decision making in the future.

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